Sydney Engineering Heritage Committee

Oral History Program

Biographical Notes

Ronald Gunn READ (1925 -)

Birth & Family: Born 25th June 1925 at Hobart. First child of Montague Ronald Read (1899) and Katherine Lade (nee Hodgman) (1894)

Sibling Frances (1928)

Education: Attended The Friends' School, Hobart, Tasmania 1931-1940 and Hobart High School 1941

Qualifications: Diploma of Mechanical Engineering, Hobart Technical College, 1950.

Memberships: The Institution of Engineers, Australia

Work History: After completing the Tasmanian Intermediate Certificate in 1941, Read started work briefly in 1942 in the Public Works Department, Hobart in the Bridge section, where his father was plant engineer. Soon after he secured an apprenticeship with H Jones and Company, Hobart, as a fitter and turner, which he completed in 1947. The company made food and munitions for the war effort. Read immediately started studying for his Diploma of Mechanical Engineering at Hobart Technical College.

On completion of his apprenticeship in 1947, Read worked as a draftsman for Silk and Textile Printers, silk screen printers at Derwent River, for a year before being made redundant. He then gained a position as a junior draftsman with Electrolytic Zinc Co. where he did minor design work such as drawings for extensions to bridges or amended drawings or tracings. At this time he was encouraged to join the Institution of Engineers. Read completed his Diploma of Mechanical Engineering in 1950.

Read then applied for and was appointed as a plant engineer with the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission , despite having had no previous practical experience. He worked at Tarraleah and Bronte Park on the Tunga Tirra Scheme a series of dams and man-made lakes, the main water supply for Tasmania, where he was responsible for the maintenance of all heavy earth moving equipment, i.e. excavators, bulldozers, cranes, large rubber tyred scrapers and trucks, tunneling equipment, crushers and conveyors.

In 1954 Read was employed by ICI at Osborne, South Australia, as workshops engineer responsible for the operation and functioning of the machining, electrical, boiler-making, carpentry and painting workshops. ICI was manufacturing and harvesting salt from tidal flats and saltwater. Read was transferred in 1956 to the solar saltfields near Port Adelaide and as Saltfields Engineer was

responsible for operations and maintenance of harvesting and pumping equipment during 10 harvests. He was promoted to Superintendent in 1959 and maintained a dual role. He became aware of safety issues and proactive safety precautions. During his time at the saltfields, Read installed a continuous salt dissolving sprinkler system which allowed the manufacturing of salt to continue on a 24 hour basis. This reduced the workforce by a third. The largest harvest at that time was 420,000 tonnes, and has since been doubled.

In 1965 Read transferred to Melbourne to help in the redesign of conveyors at ICI's Yarraville fertilizer plant, which had been designed on the Minimum Adequate Design and were not wide enough to carry the volume of, or cope with, fertilizer.

Six months later he was transferred to ICI's Botany Bay petro-chemical plant as Senior Engineer, to act as liaison officer between ICI and the Department of Labour and Industry. This position was created in order to prevent a total shutdown and inspection of all pressure vessels as a result of the engineering staff's non-compliance with regulations regarding pressure vessels operation and repair. During his time there from 1965–1985, Read was able to dramatically change the culture on site re safety standards by initiating improved practices in use of construction materials, on-line inspection techniques, encouraging better processing methods to prevent degradation of machinery and through regular staff training in safety awareness.

Read contributed to the industry by holding membership concurrently on nine Standards Australia Committees** and was involved in the raising of standards and changing of regulations of many of these Committees. He was chairman of a subcommittee which prepared a Standard known as AS/NZS 3788 – Pressure Equipment Inservice Inspection. It became a national standard which was a world's first.

In retirement, Read was a consultant (1985-2001) to ICI and others in pressure equipment operations, fire risk reduction and dangerous goods assessment accreditation and storage. He is interested in Scouting and bush walking , while his community activities include meals on Wheels and community bus driving.

** ME/1 Boilers and Unfired Pressure Vessels
ME/2 Gas Cylinders
ME/15 LP Gas
ME/17 Flammable and Combustible Liquids
MS/11 Classification of Hazardous Areas
SF/37 Safe Working in Confined Spaces
AU/17 Road Tankers for Hazardous Liquids and Gases
SF/37 Budenberg Type Pressure Gauges
WD/4 Welding Safety

Prepared by Margaret Torrens, July 2003 from an oral history interview by Margaret Torrens conducted on 15th July 2003.